

Fort Hays State University

## FHSU Scholars Repository

---

College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse  
Oral Histories

Archives Online

---

7-1-1996

### Master Teacher Interview with Deliece Mullen

Larry Mills

*Fort Hays State University*

Kelly Richardson

*Fort Hays State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors>

#### Content Disclaimer

The primary source materials contained in the Fort Hays State University Special Collections and Archives have been placed there for research purposes, preservation of the historical record, and as reflections of a past belonging to all members of society. Because this material reflects the expressions of an ongoing culture, some items in the collections may be sensitive in nature and may not represent the attitudes, beliefs, or ideas of their creators, persons named in the collections, or the position of Fort Hays State University.

---

#### Recommended Citation

Mills, Larry and Richardson, Kelly, "Master Teacher Interview with Deliece Mullen" (1996). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 261.

<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/261>

This Document is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives Online at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of FHSU Scholars Repository.

**MASTER TEACHER INTERVIEW  
WITH  
DELIECE MULLEN**

**LARRY MILLS  
KELLY RICHARDSON**

**Fort Hays State University  
Educational Research  
Summer 1996**

## **CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH DELIECE MULLEN**

On Wednesday, July 3, 1996, Deliece Mullen was interviewed and videotaped at O'Loughlin Elementary School in Hays, Kansas. The seven research objectives for this project provided the format for this narrative of the videotaped interview.

### **Education and Teaching Experience**

Mullen graduated from Fort Hays State University in 1989 with a B.S. in Elementary Education and endorsements in Science, Social Studies, and Language Arts (K-9). In May 1996, Mullen completed an M.S. in Elementary Education.

While in college, Mullen worked at a day care center in Hays. She later began her own home day care center while she finished her undergraduate degree. She completed her student teaching at Washington Elementary School in Hays, where Tonya Channell was the building principal. In 1989 she accepted her first teaching position with U.S.D. 489 at Washington Elementary. During her first year of teaching, Mullen began collaborating with another teacher on using the whole language method. After successfully incorporating it into her classroom, the building principal encouraged others to observe her innovative methods.

In 1990, she became part of a core group of teachers who formed O'Loughlin Elementary, a new, innovative school in Hays. Mullen's teaching position at O'Loughlin was with kindergarten and first grade.

### **Philosophies and Methods of O'Loughlin Elementary**

O'Loughlin Elementary was created because of overcrowding in the Hays district. The district discovered that remodeling an existing building into an elementary school would be less expensive than building a new structure. U.S.D. 489 purchased a facility previously occupied by a private girls Catholic high school. The staff worked together during the summer of 1990 to design the school. They were allowed to make decisions on almost everything that was done--from the selection of furniture to the materials that were to be used. Most of the teachers who were chosen to form O'Loughlin transferred from other schools in the district. They had been studying effective schools and were committed to the methods that were being considered. The staff was unified from the beginning. This core group of initial teachers shared similar philosophies of effective schools.

The following discusses some of the school's innovative philosophies:

Integrated Curriculum. With this philosophy the teachers did not just teach writing during one block of time. For example, writing was taught while doing a project for math or science. With this method the students could connect the skills and see how they would be used in other areas.

The school was not only integrated among the different subject areas, but also with the use of themes. In many schools a theme is chosen for the building and the complexity depends on the grade level of the students. At O'Loughlin a different decision was made regarding the use of themes. Each grade level had its own them, and the theme would not be taught at any other grade level. The grade level themes were based on



science concepts. The teachers collaborated to decide which themes would be used for each grade level, integrating it into all curricular areas.

Mullen shared that giving up certain themes was one of the more difficult things the staff had to do. After developing a unit on the rain forest that she enjoyed teaching, she "gave it up" to a second grade teacher who had actually experienced two weeks in the rain forest and had many things to share with kids.

Looping. Another unique method implemented at O'Loughlin was called looping. O'Loughlin divided their loops into K-1, 2-3, and 4-5. In looping, teachers stayed with their class for two years. Mullen shared that looping was beneficial to both the students and the teachers. The month or two to get to know what was expected of each other was not required. It was no longer wasted time. The teacher knew the student's strengths and weaknesses; the students knew the procedures and the classroom rules.

Textbooks. O'Loughlin was a school that taught without the use of textbooks or workbooks. The school decided not to use textbooks so they could design their own curriculum. The philosophy regarding textbooks was that they were just one of the resources available to students. They felt they could develop a better program by bringing resources from many different sources rather than from just one textbook author. All of the learning was hands-on. In science students completed experiments and in math the students used manipulatives.

Technology. One of the major philosophies that guided the formation of the school was the emphasis placed on using technology. The principal at O'Loughlin believed that technology was where the future would be for

her students. Most of the site based funds and the PTA funds for the school were directed into technology.

The school made a commitment to have every student in the school work on the computers forty-five minutes each day. Continually updating and advancing the technological capabilities of the school was one of the strongest goals. An extension of the technology philosophy was the belief O'Loughlin had regarding how the computers would be used. The students were not using the computers to "just gain computer time" or "become familiar with computers." Students needed to view computers as tools to gain insightful information. The staff and administration held strongly to the fact that the amount of information available to the students was rapidly increasing--technology was exploding in the 1990's. The students were introduced to a great deal on the computers and were asked to complete complex tasks, even at the kindergarten/first grade level. Kindergarten and first grade students were assigned HyperCard projects with story pages and working buttons to include pop-up information. O'Loughlin's unique philosophy was that the projects were not viewed as the end. The projects were merely a tool to get to the real issue.

Mullen expanded on the technology philosophy this way:

"The reason we believe this way is that we know the work force is going to be a very different place when these students graduate. We believe that you have to teach children how to problem solve through technology. That is something different than what we had when we went through school. You could punch some information into the computer and come up with some great projects and you could run some programs. You really didn't know how to create things on the computer and you definitely didn't know how to solve problems on the computer. Where do you go to find answers? Where are your resources?

One of the things that we know is that we have to teach students how to find information. We are in the



information age and we know that we can't teach them everything they need to know anymore. Information is doubling every three years. That is scary! What we have to do is teach them how to access information, how to interpret it, how to use it, and then how to evaluate it.

We are accessing information through the internet. We are using a lot of CD Roms and Laser Disks. We use several hyper media programs where the students are creating both linear and non-linear presentations.

Linear presentations just click from page to page. Nonlinear presentations let you branch off and select different ways that you want to go within the programs. This button tells you what I know about the Civil War. If you click this button, you will learn the history of the Civil War. This button tells you about specific battles, and this one might tell you about the food at that time. The students can create all kinds of projects that let you know they are learning.

While they are doing this they are encountering different kinds of problems. We encourage the students to get the resource and find out why it didn't work. That's another way we've incorporated technical reading into our program. Read and see what the manual says about solving the problem."

The emphasis on learning was placed on these two questions: "What do you do when it doesn't work?" and "Where do you find the information you will need to fix the problem?" Problem solving and how to access information were the cornerstone for the technology program at O'Loughlin. The staff felt that these skills would be applicable to whatever system the world of technology might develop. It was not uncommon for students to be referred to the manual to find information that would solve a specific problem. It was widely known at that time that the students in our schools were weak in the area of technical reading. These skills were O'Loughlin's answer to improve technical reading.

Parent Volunteers. O'Loughlin was also unique in the amount of parent volunteers used in the school. A "choice" school in the Hays

district, O'Loughlin held no geographic boundaries and the students were enrolled on a first-come, first-serve basis. Parents who wanted to enroll their children in the school could do so as long as there were openings. - The parents were encouraged to participate in their child's education. For their QPA report at the end of the 1996 school year, the administration calculated that there had been a little over 3300 parent volunteer hours during that school year. The parents were not sent to the copy machine or asked to do simple chores for the teachers. They were used in the classrooms and helped the teachers implement a hands-on, individualized approach. It was not uncommon to have three or four parents for each classroom on a regular schedule.

Inclusion. O'Loughlin was committed to the process of inclusion. Special needs students, who met the requirements, worked in the classroom with the other students who were not on special education plans. The school had students with learning disabilities, behavior disorders, orthopedic problems, and hearing, language, or speech disabilities. These students were all included in the regular education classroom. Learning consultants came in to work with these students as needed to accommodate learning for all the students. At times the teachers grouped students with similar disabilities and worked with them while the parent volunteer assisted the other students in their activities.

Portfolio-Assessment. Probably the most distinguishable philosophy at O'Loughlin was that there were no grades. At first this was frightening for the parents, especially when the other schools in the district were giving grades. In the beginning, the parents would ask the teachers to confidentially tell them what grade the student would have if



the school gave grades. The students did not have a problem with it. It really didn't make any difference to them. Mullen observed, "The students were not learning to make a certain grade. They were learning to learn rather than to make an A or a B."

The school utilized portfolios to assess the student's progress. The students and teachers collected samples to be included in the portfolios. The students did most of the writing that explained why the sample was included. During this process, the teacher had the opportunity to explain to the students what they were doing well and what they would need to work on in the future. These portfolios were shared with the parents at their conferences. It was the parent's choice to have the conference with or without the student present. The school preferred that the student be present so they could explain why the sample was included and what it showed about their progress.

The process of student initiated conferences began with the kindergarten students. They required a little more assistance from the teacher, but Mullen pointed out that this was a start in the process of self-reflection. It also helped them begin to demonstrate their mastery in learning.

One question that was commonly asked the teachers and administration at O'Loughlin was "How do these students do when they move on to middle school or maybe move to another district?" This question was a major one with parents in the beginning. A policy was adopted allowing grades to be given, at the parent's request, in the second semester of the fifth grade. After the first year, only one or two parents requested that the grades be given. In the report for QPA for 1996, the administration found that over 80% of the O'Loughlin

students were on the honor rolls at their middle schools. Some people thought the students would fall apart when faced with the pressure of grades, but the students had "learned to learn" and continued to excel.

Staff Development/Professional Growth. O'Loughlin could be described as an entire staff that read and discussed current research on effective schools. This work was done as a group and the effective methods were implemented with the whole faculty. The teachers were not against doing work in the evenings and during the summer. The attitude about professional growth and working hard came from the principal and was adopted by the staff.

#### **Personal Teaching Style and Methods**

Mullen was a hands-on teacher with a contagious enthusiasm for her work. In her classroom you would see tables rather than rows of desks. The students did much of their work cooperatively although Mullen pointed out that her students were also able to work independently at the tables. Mullen described her method of cooperative learning this way: "One of the greatest myths about cooperative learning is that you have to do everything together--you don't have to. What it means is that you can share to a point and then you have to work on your own."

There were times when it had to be quiet in the classroom, but for the most part Mullen believed in the different learning styles and environments for the different students. What was a good learning environment for one was not necessarily a good environment for another. Mullen stressed the fact that she was not the only resource in the room. The students could and were encouraged to ask others for help. This



might include the student teacher, teacher's aide, parent volunteer, team teacher, or even another student. Different environments might include playing music or dimming the lights. Mullen was not afraid to use many tools, including markers, with these kindergarten and first grade students. She said, "You just have to teach them how to use the markers. If they write on themselves, they don't get to use them." She believed in teaching responsibility by giving it to the students and then teaching them how to use it.

She described her classroom as "organized chaos." Her room was not a place where the students were sitting at their desks and working on things without talking to each other. There was always something going on and usually it was more than one thing. At the same time some students would be working individually while others were working in a group. This procedure worked because the students knew the rules for the different ways they worked together.

Mullen believed in constant self-evaluation and reflection. Throughout the day she would write herself notes about the day's work. She believed that when you wrote something down you gained a greater understanding of what you were doing. The notes were then used to evaluate the day through self-reflection.

During the process for National Board Certification, Mullen had to document lesson plans and videotapes of those lessons. In her reflective notes for any given day, Mullen wrote what she wanted to happen and what actually happened. In the interview, Mullen stated that she had a hard time writing detailed lesson plans for an entire week. The task was difficult because she preferred to evaluate each day before planning the



next day. She would not move on if the students had not understood the concepts to her satisfaction. She noted that it was difficult for substitute teachers to follow her plans, so she used a "substitute box" with general activities whenever she had to be out of the classroom.

Mullen's National Board application contained an incident that vividly demonstrated her style in the classroom and also her work habits. The students in Mullen's kindergarten class had previously completed a research project on the Monarch butterfly. She modeled note-taking using the Viceroy defense system of the butterfly and demonstrated the method of going from a note to a paragraph style.

The students were instructed to use the books piled on a table in the room to get more details about the topics they had chosen on Antarctica. Students scrambled to find more information. They were excited about doing the research! Mullen revealed how one boy asked to go to the office to make a copy because his friend needed the same material. When he returned, the boys used highlighters to mark sentences for their topics. Immediately all of the students needed highlighters. This activity lasted for about five minutes, and then the problems arose.

The research books were not all at the same reading level and not all the students were able to read the book they had selected. Usually the students would ask each other for help but that day was different because everyone was so "into" their own task. Frustration was building in the classroom. As Mullen surveyed the room, she witnessed a sea of hands. All the students needed the teacher's help at one time!

Mullen asked the students to put down their research and join her on the floor. She remembered what she had read in the book, *How To*

*Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk.* The advice was to just state what you saw in simple words. Mullen told the students exactly what she had seen without making any judgment. Because of her tone and compassion students began to open up. They started to express their frustrations to her. The students had been told about how the brain releases cortisol when they are frustrated and that this actually inhibits neural transmitters preventing learning. "Just imagine how much cortisol is in our brains right now!" The students understood what their teacher was saying. The students were then asked to help solve the problem. The schedule was changed and Mullen worked with the students individually on their research projects. The thought process Mullen went through in solving this problem, as well as the self evaluation, are included in her reflective notes for this day. She also included a possible solution to help with similar projects in the future. (See Appendix for the complete notes.)

### **Work Habits and Commitment**

Mullen believed in the importance of reading as much current literature as possible and she possessed outstanding work habits. Fifteen or sixteen hour work days were not uncommon for her. In her notes she wrote that she owned a vast library of professional journals and books. She established the practice of reading professional literature at least one hour every day. All the teachers at O'Loughlin had committed to reading and staying current with the research in their educational area. These ideas were shared at weekly staff meetings. The staff members took turns sharing what they had read with the other staff



members. As she read, Mullen wrote notes in the margins of her books to share at the staff meetings.

In her first seven years of teaching, Mullen accomplished a great deal. She was constantly working to find better ways to teach her students. She also felt a responsibility to teach the student teachers and teachers aides who were in her classroom.

Mullen developed or co-developed several new programs at O'Loughlin Elementary and programs created in conjunction with the education department at Fort Hays State University. She was asked to give many presentations and became an adjunct professor at Fort Hays State from 1990 to 1994.

#### **Committees and Presentations**

Mullen's leadership skills were evident through her participation on state and local committees. As a member of the Kansas Mathematics Improvement Program Advisory Council she helped provide Kansas educators and the Kansas State Board of Education staff with dialogue opportunities for improvement in mathematics instruction and curriculum. Other responsibilities included revisions of the state math curriculum standards.

In District 489, she served on the District Math Curriculum Committee, Steering Committee, Computer Curriculum Committee, Sick-Leave Committee, and the Social Studies Curriculum Committee. Mullens participated as a co-developer of the District-Wide Study Group for Administration and Teachers which met monthly to discuss educational readings.



At O'Loughlin Elementary School she served as a team member for writing the Blue Ribbon Award and Kansas Reading Award. She was also active on the school's Project Advisory Board, THOT Team, and served as a co-chairperson for the Site Based Council in developing goals for the North Central Accreditation process of school improvement.

In the area of field-based education, she worked with Fort Hays State University as the co-chairperson for the Research Committee to develop a program to measure the effectiveness of the field-based program. She also served on the Research Committee for Evaluation of Pre-Service Teachers at FHSU, the FHSU Advisory Board for the T.E.A.M Project, and the O'Loughlin Project Advisory Board that evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the field-based teacher education pilot program.

Mullen also shared her enthusiasm and knowledge with other educators through numerous professional presentations and inservices. Areas emphasized included the methodology of multi-age teaming, portfolio-assessment, whole language, and brain-based learning. She also presented diverse programs in technology, language arts, mathematics, and parent education.

### **Awards**

Mullens was presented the 1995 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics Teaching. This program identified outstanding teachers, K-12, who then served as role models for their colleagues and who formed a leadership core to help advance the major reform efforts. The award recognized teachers both state-wide and nationally. Mullens was nominated for the award by her building principal, Tonya Channell. She

was required to submit her philosophy of teaching math and also include a sample unit of instruction. She submitted a unit designed for K-1 multi-age teaming on Antarctica. The award provided her with a week's stay in Washington, D.C. where she had the opportunity to meet with winners from the other states and share ideas. Mullen said, "That was probably the best thing about the whole deal. I got to meet all of these exceptional teachers throughout the United States."

As a result of her award, Mullen was asked to be a member of the Talent Pool--a collection of experts in the field of education. When someone from the state needed an expert, they could call on someone from the pool. Some of the committees and many of the presentations developed as a direct result of the award and participating in the Talent Pool.

Although proud to be part of an award winning team at O'Loughlin Elementary School, Mullens experienced her most glorious moment with O'Loughlin's selection as *Redbook* magazines Outstanding School in Kansas in 1995. "We were all really excited the year we got that." O'Loughlin's pilot program, TEAM Project, won the ATE Exemplary Teacher Education Program Award in 1994. The American Teacher's Education Association issued this award for the O'Loughlin Field-Based Teacher Education Project in which FHSU placed their students in classrooms all four years of their college studies. The program later expanded to include the entire Curriculum and Instruction Department at Fort Hays State University. O'Loughlin also gained recognition for Outstanding Technology Programs in Kansas and the Kansas Exemplary Reading Program Award.



Individual honors included a nomination for Technology Educator of the Year in 1995, sponsored through *Technology and Learning* Magazine. Mullen's students nominated her in 1994 for an award sponsored by area businesses, U.S.D. #489 Teacher of the Week. She received a \$750.00 Southwestern Bell Education Grant for robotics and a \$500.00 McDonald's Education Grant for materials for an Ecological Unit of study on the rain forest.

#### **National Board Certification**

Mullen became familiar with the National Board Certification process through her reading. One drawback to the process existed; it would cost \$1,000 to apply. Mullen agreed to get involved with the certification process through a field test in the area of Middle Childhood/Generalist. Although free to participants, the field test became an extensive process where rules and regulations often changed. "Free had its cost!" Four hundred teachers began the process, but fewer than two hundred completed the requirements to the end.

Mullen estimated that she spent 170 to 200 hours preparing her portfolio. The portfolio included a video tape of teaching experiences, and lesson plans with her reflections from the day. Applicants were also required to submit samples of their work from three different leadership role areas: professional development, parent and family involvement, and personal service. These extensive pieces painted a picture of the teacher and how they had tried to make the profession better.

During the summer of 1995, after completing the process, all applicants went to an assessment center for two days of testing. The testing process required the participants to write essays on various topics



during the 8-hour day. Out of approximately two hundred who wrote the essays, Mullens was among the highest scoring on the assessment. She was invited to North Carolina, along with 16 other top applicants from across the nation, to write the national performance standards for National Board Certification.